ONE GRAND PASSION

December 8, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord,..." -- Luke 3:4 (RSV)

Scripture

Psalm 25:1-10
Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6

"In life there are many loves, but only one grande passion."

The phrase caught my eye, not while reading the newly discovered Shakespeare love sonnet or Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but actually while perusing the lush advertisements in the December issue of Chicago Magazine. It was impossible to miss this one: full page, provocative photograph with the caption: "In life there are many loves but only one Grande Passion." The product being marketed, of course, was not human passion at all, but a French Liqueur, which the ad suggestively announces, is "a sensual coupling of passion fruit and French Armagnac" (Who could resist that?)

But the phrase sounds true. So off I went to Bartletts Familiar Quotations to see who said it. Surely it was Shakespeare -- or perhaps Ovid. Actually the only thing close was by Israel Zangwill who, in addition to coining the "melting pot" metaphor for America once wrote -- "In how many lives does love really play a dominant part? The average taxpayer is no more capable of a 'grand passion' than of a grand opera." (Romeo and Juliet and Other Love Stories)

Yet, I kept thinking, there is truth here. One grand passion...to be fully alive is to know the meaning of the phrase. To be fully human is to have had deep and compelling passion called out of one. How sad to live seven or eight decades and never know about that.

A Sunday School teacher once reported that she was asking the eight year olds to describe something they believed in and loved more than anything else -- something for which their love would never change. The pedagogical assumption was that the youngsters would understand in this exercise passionate commitment to God, and that they would probably identify their own parents as that for which their love would never change. However, when she got to my son, he looked her straight in the eye, and said he would forever love the Chicago Cubs.

Passion -- one grand passion -- is the deep and compelling force that energizes and animates and inspires us to be what we are. Sometimes it overwhelms all else and looks like madness. Sometimes it is so big and strong that it will not be integrated and there is about the person a singularity that is tragic, although enormously creative. But not to know it at all: never to be passionate, is to have missed something wonderfully human, something divine about our humanness.

In a delightful literary autobiography, Eudora Welty tells about the process by which she became a writer, and a good one. She had studied, read and written for school newspapers, but it was while reading Yeats at the University of Wisconsin that she "made a discovery for myself that has fed my life ever since... The word is Passion." (One Writer's Beginnings, p. 70)

One Grand Passion -- a common motif in contemporary social criticism is that Western culture does not encourage passion, does not, in fact, have a respectable place for it. We are inundated with sex and violence on television, some suggest, because there is no other place for passion to be celebrated. Sad pornography seems to have replaced joyful eros. The mainstream of culture prefers control, responsibility, moderation and is suspicious of passion of any kind. In religion of our variety, passion is suspect and there is a dichotomy, sadly, between head and heart. The story is told about the enthusiastic worshipper in a Presbyterian Church who insisted on responding verbally to the preacher with a litany of "Amen's and Praise the Lords." Finally, an Elder asked him to stop. The man said -- "But I've got religion." To which the Elder responded, "Well you certainly didn't get it here."

Our forte is reason. Our strength is our rationality. Culturally and religiously we are uncomfortable with passion. And onto the stage today, the Second Sunday in Advent, walks a curious figure, a man of singular passion, and he is introduced by some strikingly passionate Biblical material. He is John the Baptist, who has found his grand passion, a man hard to love and impossible to become sentimental about.

What is he doing here, in the middle of Advent, with the holy family on their way to Bethlehem, and the gorgeous carols playing and all the lights twinkling? What is he doing standing in the mud of the Jordan River, howling about God's kingdom? What has possessed the church for many centuries to use this Sunday to recall him, of all people? He represents a dimension of the story that needs to be told. It's the part of the Gospel of Christmas about our humanness, and about grand passion, and standing in the mud of some Jordan River with tears in our eyes because out of the cool controlled ethos of modern life we have found something, someone to die for. But first the Baptist: who is he?

The 100 years before the birth of Jesus was a peculiarly quiet time for God's people. Back from their exile in Babylon, with a rebuilt Jerusalem and a temple now several hundred years old, they were settled in, a quietly and respectably religious people. It had been hundreds of years since there

was a prophet to fire the people with love for God and love for justice and righteousness. The memory was there, however. The prophet Malachi, whose book is the last in our Old Testament, had written:

> "the messenger of the covenant...is coming...
> But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can
> stand when he appears?
> For he is like a refiner's fire..."

The prophets reminded Israel that whenever God comes it will not necessarily be pleasant. Sometimes God's presence will feel like judgment.

In those quiet years before the birth of Jesus, when no prophet spoke in Israel, that idea was kept alive by communities of devout people who lived together in the desert. John the Baptist may have been one of them. They built monastic communities around the Dead Sea, the most famous one of which is Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. They lived a strict, celibate, and simple life. They practiced baptism and ritual bathing, they adopted orphans, they rigidly kept the law, and looked for the appearance of the Lord's messenger and the Messiah who would follow. In their Book of Discipline, discovered at Qumran, the archeologists found a mandate that members of the community are to sever their connection with ordinary people in order to "go into the wilderness to prepare the way." That phrase, a quotation from another prophet, is employed by the Gospel writers to introduce John the Baptist. And he, it would seem, saw himself in terms of the passionate messenger of God who would prepare the way and who would burn like a refiner's fire.

John looked and sounded like a prophet. He was certainly passionate. He was portrayed brilliantly by Michael York in television's most recent Biblical epic: wild, uncontrollable, uncompromising, unpleasant. He compared the people who came to hear him, with a den of snakes. Respectable religiousity was not enough, John shouted. God demanded a renewed commitment to righteousness, a passionate devotion to the life of the Kingdom.

It's difficult to be soft and cozy about John the Baptist. From a distance of twenty centuries he still makes us uncomfortable. And he is on stage today as a passionate interruption to Advent sentimentality.

I am not interested in pulpit tirades against the rampant commercialization of Christmas by the culture. The target is too fat -- the battle too easy. Besides, I'm convinced God is pleased whenever human beings are generous and celebrate their love and talk about peace on earth for whatever reason.

The danger is not that happy pagans will defile our sacred feast by celebrating it, but that we -- who think we are the custodians of the celebration, will so romanticize it that we miss the truth it represents as thoroughly as the crowd at the bar in the Bethlehem Inn behind which Jesus was born missed him. That's why, by the way, the church has always seemed a little grouchy during Advent. The culture is going berserk -- enjoying a year-end bash, and the church puts on purple. The department stores are playing carols while the

church is singing hymns in a minor key about mournful exiles. And, aesthetically, the institution whose affair it is comes off a distant and plain second to festively decorated pizza parlors on Rush Street. It's not that we are opposed to joy and celebration. It's just that there is a totality about this truth which is diminished and trivialized if we exclude the John the Baptist part of the story, and the refiner's fire and the humanness and the loneliness and the alienation for which the birth happened. For centuries we have been observing Advent as a time of preparation and reflection, pointing to the time when the carols are sung and the bells peal and the candles are lighted. There is, of course, no commercial potential there, and emotionally-spiritually there is no instant gratification, and therefore we will always be several weeks behind, and our Advent will always seem restrained.

John the Baptist is a reminder that when Jesus came it was not all pleasantness and light and happiness; that what happened when Jesus confronted the people and structures of power in his culture could, in fact, be described with metaphors like "refiner's fire" and "fuller's soap;" that on an occasion when he did indeed come to the temple, few could stand.

John himself, of course, was martyred. He baptized Jesus one day, and after that, apparently went on proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom and the corruption and injustice of Herod's Kingdom until he ended up in prison and was executed. His presence on the stage in Advent is a reminder, in the midst of all the wonderful pre-Christmas sentiment, that the baby grew up, got in trouble, and was crucified; that to celebrate birth is at least to be attentive to the man the baby became. Even as the whole demise , pluralistic culture pauses to rejoice in God's love, or at least human love, we Christians are reminded that followers of Jesus will, on occasion, find themselves in conflict: that Jesus has a way of precipitating conflict in the human heart: that he is a refiner's fire -- making intolerable our own moral compromises and personal rationalizations: John the Baptist is a reminder that followers of Jesus will be in conflict on occasion with the culture.

There is a trial going on in Tucson at the moment in which some Christians, including a Presbyterian minister, are indicted for breaking Federal Immigration Law by sheltering Central American refugees. It is not an easy matter for us. The law has been broken: it has been broken because these people believe passionately that it is conflict with a higher law -- the judge has ruled that that argument is not valid in a federal court. Regardless of our position on the legality involved, and the complexity of our immigration dilemma, and the rightness, morality or effectiveness of the administration's Central American policies, the Christian community needs to be reminded again that to follow Jesus Christ faithfully is to follow passionately and singularly and that there may be occasions when that commitment will conflict directly with other commitments.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his prison cell in Nazi Germany, who taught us about it -- and whose lasting contribution to our understanding of our religion was not in the area of civil disobedience, but in helping us to see that grace is not cheap -- that the love of Christ is strong enough to die, and that to be alive in Christ -- is to assume for oneself that same passionate discipleship.

"When Christ calls us," Bonhoeffer wrote, "he bids us come and die."

John the Baptist is a reminder that the Christmas story and the Christian religion is not an other-worldly and spiritual moraliby ploy but an utterly human drama. He is a reminder that Christmas is about choruses of angels and mysterious visitors from the East -- but it is also about a young man looking for the meaning of his life. Standing knee deep in the brown water, his feet in the mud, John the Baptist is a beautifully human counter-point to the ethereal twinkling lights and fashionably dressed shoppers on Michigan Avenue. He is a blunt interruption -- a reminder of our humanness, and the incredible message which is elbowed out of the celebration -- namely that it is our humanness, that God loves so much he sent a son to be born into it.

John is on stage with his grand passion for God's Kingdom to remind us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ appeals to that passion in us -- cuts through the careful controls to the deep and secret place in us, where our passion lives. He is a reminder that the God who comes in this birth is not satisfied with polite religiosity, is angered, in fact, by dutiful ritualism, a God whose jealousy means that he wants our hearts and minds and deepest loyalty. John is a reminder that this God's love for us is the strongest force in the universe: that it can be like a refiner's fire as well as a mother's lullaby, but that nothing in creation can separate us from it.

God's commitment to us is what is saving about the Gospel of Christ. God's commitment to us is strong and deep and human and will be an energy, an urgent, compelling force in the radical, earthy, human, middle of our own lives.

"Behold, the lamb of God," John the Baptist said when he baptized Jesus... God had become his one grand passion and when he died his martyr's death, I have always imagined that he died -- as you and I would want to die -- fully alive, fully human, fully intentional, still raging, still passionately in love with God, sustained by the strength of God's love for him.

This is what Christmas is finally. It is what it all points to -- all the gentle beauty, all the warmly human gestures, all the longing and loving and laughing. Beneath it all is the most incredible force in the world -- a love that judges, cleanses and burns...and also warms and comforts and inspires and until the day we die gives life.

John the Baptist is on stage in the middle of Advent to remind us that following Jesus is not always easy nor pleasant. He is a reminder of the strenuous demands of the Gospel, and the call of Jesus Christ to live our lives for him.

But he is on stage as well to remind us that there is full life to be lived, that if we never love deeply and passionately we will have missed something very precious. He is on stage bidding us to care deeply about life, to weep at suffering, to be angry at injustices, to rejoice at beauty -- to risk vulnerability, to love with everything in us those we have been given to love, to love our own lives enough to want to live them thoroughly, to love God and God's Kingdom in the world with a grand and glorious and life-giving passion.

John found his one grand passion. And his presence in our Advent observance is a summons -- to you and me -- to discover it: to celebrate this gentle gift of love, as the birth of something big enough to live and die for; the birth of a baby who was and is truth and light and laughter and life forever.

Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the lamb, for ever and ever.

Amen